

## A Secret Fear by 000Unknown000

**Series:** [Strange Bonds \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Cabin, F/M, First Post, Fluff, Girlfriend, Mileven, Oneshot, Post-Season/Series 02, Spring, but I do have some lumax ideas, el has wonderful friends, el needs to experience the joys of summer people!, halp, i love these two too much, i was up at 2 in the morning giggling like an idiot while writing the ending, long time lurker, mike's perspective, some lumax but it's mainly hinted, tadpaolecatching, tadpoles

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**Summary:**

"Seeing her walk through the Byers door, alive and fierce eyes softening once they locked with his felt like an enormous weight lifted from the pit of his chest and he could breathe a little easier amidst the chaos around him."

A bored day at the cabin turns to gifting El a new experience and the mentioning of a topic Mike has been hesitant to tackle.

## A Secret Fear

### Author's Note:

I've written a few fics just to get the ideas out of my head so I could sleep, but am only now getting the balls to share one, though it won't be my last now that I'm getting more comfortable with my writing. Constructive criticism is welcome!

"They're getting away, they're getting away!"

"GOD, I can see that!"

"Wait, careful-" Before the red head could finish, the dark skinned boy leaned over the rocky bed too far and lost his balance with an alarmed "Shit!" The brunette haired girl kneeling beside him managed to grab a fistfull of his t-shirt before his body toppled down, almost taking her with him as splashes of water erupted around them, landing on everyone else as they scurried away.

Max's mouth hung open for a brief moment before lifting to a smile and continuing. "...not to fall....". Lucas rushed to stand up in the knee deep water and rubbed the stinging liquid out of his eyes.

Once recovered from their shock and seeing their friend was unhurt, the others erupted into fits of giggles at the comical looking boy with damp clothes clinging to his form, flicking the water off his hands with a defeated look on his face.

"Smooth Stalker, smooth. Max quipped, slowly clapping her hands.

"Aw, shut up!" He flinged water in her direction, making her shriek and step back.

Lucas' turned his attention to Dustin and El, who were still crouched right at the water's edge in front of him, with El softly chuckling while Dustin made a point of exaggerating his bellowing laughter.

"Oh, you think this is funny?" He asked mischievously before grabbing both their arms and dragging them into the water, turning everyone's fits of giggles to a chorus of laughter.

Mike paused to watch everyone else splash water at each other and rush to drag the next victim into the murky depths of the little creek.

This is how it should be, them having fun without a care in the world, even if it's for only a moment. Not fighting for their lives as their world seems to almost come crashing down around them, and instead simply enjoy the decent parts of life in a seemingly dark world.

It felt like things were slowly becoming somewhat normal, the tension and constantly shifting eyes sort of leaving everyone. Even Will was becoming more energetic and less tense. It was starting to seem like the upside down and it's creatures would exist in their lives as nothing more than a painful secret.

For a bit, Mike's eyes followed Lucas as he chased Max while everyone cheered her on. Mike's eyes settled on El, who used the distraction to sneak a handful of water onto Will's head and laughed triumphantly as he yelped and spun around to face her.

It just occurred to Mike that he never heard her acting so playfully before, eyes crinkling with mirth, with hints of joy lifting up the corners of her mouth enough to reveal a dimple one side.

El ceased smiling and looked up ahead in the creek. Her face hardened to a familiar, intense look of concentration that always made the quiet girl look almost unrecognisable. Curiosity aroused, Mike looked in the direction her eyes were firmly fixated on and saw a small orb of water rise up into the air with what looked like little black specks circling around inside it.

"Hold it!" He shouted as soon as he registered what she was doing and grabbed the nearest clear jar and rushed to the orb, holding what was once a pickle jar up as still as possible. Attention grabbed by the sudden noise, the other kids dropped what they were doing and turned their heads to watch the bubble of glistening water slowly descend into the clear jar for filling it up with a small splash.

At times it was still hard for everyone to comprehend that El's abilities were a fact of reality, even if they were as natural to her as breathing. Though she was slowly growing stronger, she still avoided

using her powers to do anything more than switching TV channels or undoing locks, choosing to push herself further at the the risk of pain and exhaustion only when she was practicing or when it was more convenient/ necessary. As a result, it was still difficult for those around her to used to her power being perfectly normal for her.

Mike lifted the jar out of the shade of the trees and into the sunlight, studying the tiny tadpoles darting within the glass confines. “See, that’s how you catch tadpoles’! Mike bellowed while wadling through the mud and water towards El. He handed her the jar so she could examine the little animals with her usual curious brown eyes, likely having never seen any upclose before.

All Mike could see when he looked at the tadpoles was the strange pollywog like creature Dustin excitedly showcased behind the closed door of the AV room. Images of darkened halls, odors of fresh blood mixed with sweat, piercing alarms, flashing red lights, screams, and security footage of creatures with heads lined with teeth stepping over barely moving bodies.....

Mike pushed the memories from his focus and grinned. They were safe and happy, no demogorgons or men with guns lurking in the bushes, he was happy.

“That's cheating.” Lucas declared. El stuck her tongue out at him in response, something she’s seen Will do after temporarily stealing Dustin’s prized hat while he threatened to kick his ass, and something Mike has never saw her do before.

The idea to venture outside through the spring woods to capture tadpoles ocured when the party was lounging in the the cramped Hopper cabin bored, but not wanting to admit to it for El’s sake, who was excited simply to have company. She, (along with Will, but he didn’t know it) was the kid sibling of the group, and it was an unspoken rule to treat her more gently than the usual teasing and bickering that went on between everyone (besides the fact she could snap their bones in half with a single flick of her head).

Somehow the topic of tadpoles was brought up and El inquired about them. Dustin went on a lengthy explanation about the life cycles of frogs (after explaining what those are too) while El hung onto his

every word even though she had trouble understanding him, but was interested nonetheless and liked seeing his enthusiasm for a topic he seemed to enjoy.

Lucas spoke fondly of the memory of he and his little sister catching tadpoles together while his dad was fishing and jokingly wondered out loud why it didn't end with the two of trying to slit eachothers throats.

Will, desperate for something to do, suggested they go look for tadpoles, Mike said they needed to find a body of water and El perked up and old them there was a small stream nearby.

Sure, they were breaking one of Hopper's special "Don't be Stupid Rules", by venturing outside the cabin with El, but she seemed all too eager to rebel.

"El, quick using your powers to cheat!" Lucas cried, feigning frustration.

"No!" El responded, dramatically shaking her head with a taunting smile she picked up on from watching an argument on TV between a babysitter and a toddler that Mike secretly found adorable.

It amazed him how observant she was of how other people behaved and how quick she was to echo their habits. It was expected, she wanted to learn everything she missed out on in her years locked away from society, constantly asking questions and soaking up as much tidbits of information about any and everything.

She often asked about things most people would never otherwise ponder too deeply, and inspected seemingly everyday objects or sights with fascination that most would, overlook, as if the world around her was both frightening and magical.

Lucas huffed and moved his hands to his hips, continuing to play along.

"Mike! Tell your girlfriend to stop cheating!"

Mike's grin faded immediately at the mention of the word girlfriend in context with El and automatically blurted "She's not-" His words trailed off once his thoughts caught up with him. "...my girlfriend".

Sure, she was as much his best friend as the other party members were (Max was slowly getting there). Seeing her walk through the Byers door, alive and fierce eyes softening once they locked with his felt like an enormous weight lifted from the pit of his chest and he could breathe a little easier amidst the chaos around him. He cherished being able to hear her sweet voice again and the almost invisible smile residing underneath inquisitive eyes whenever he excitedly showed her something new. The occasional warmth of her hand in his, and the fluttery buzz he got in his stomach whenever they stole a kiss when they thought no one was looking.

But their relationship wasn't....normal. Their bond wasn't formed over shared interests or lame jokes exchanged over school lunches. It was formed over his desire to help someone who was alone and scared, her first taste of being treated like a human being, and a need to be by the other's side that resulted from that. El was just someone he was close to, another light in his life and he didn't think that needed a classic label.

He looked to El to see her reaction and she stared back at him, clearly confused. Mike's flustered change of attitude must of stopped her from reciting the word in a questioning tone like she usually did and decided to instead stand back and silently. Mike didn't know whether to relieved or even more anxious that she may not of known what the word meant.

The others snickered while Lucas rolled eyes and slowly nodded... "Suuurrre.....heh, heh."

Dustin theatrically threw his arms in the air and shouted in an exacerbated tone. "Jesus Christ, are all my friends too big of pussies to admit they like someone!?" Mike thought he heard a hint of resentment in his voice, but brushed it off as his imagination.

Will coughed loudly, muffling his voice with his fist. "onlymike'n'lucas \*cough\*. Lucas quit smiling and swiftly ducked his head, while Max looked at him with questioning eyebrows and a growing crooked grin.

Mike relaxed now that he wasn't the only center for teasing, but saw that El kept glancing towards his way amidst the taunts and laughter.

He could tell she was mulling over the significance of what she witnessed, she probably would not of paid no mind if not for Mike's awkward panic. She was gradually becoming more and more easy for him to read, able to say a thousand words with a simple look. She may be unpredictable at times, with a sort of mystery to the thoughts and memories kept locked in her mind, but she was anything, if not blunt.

It still felt surreal to have her back in his life. It felt like if he reached out a hand to touch her, he would wake up once again to the cold reality of her being gone and his all his grief and anger would come crashing down all over again.

Everyday spent with her offered a new discovery about her, and Mike kept discovering things that somehow made her more beautiful to him.

The time he first laid his eyes on her, her appearance stuck him as odd rather than attractive. He thought the fine brunette fuzz across her head rather than the usual long flowing locks pulled into weird hairstyles of girls he saw at school strange. The intensity of her gaze that seemed to hide dark secrets made him uncomfortable. He wasn't afraid of her like Dustin and Lucas were, he only saw a cold and scared little girl silently pleading for help, but too broken to utter the right words. But he wouldn't whisper 'pretty', like he did when he saw a girl he had a secret crush on walk past him at school, completely oblivious to scrawny Frogface AV president.

It wasn't until he noticed the hints of amber hidden in her big brown eyes, or the way she almost lit up when she nervously chuckled when the footrest of the armchair suddenly sprung up beneath her feet, along with the sincerity and softness in her voice when she told him she understood rather than mocking him for not being to weak to stand up to Troy, or the determination in her face when she refused to give up reaching a stranger she knew only from a brief description of the term 'friend'.

The blonde wig and pink dress was what really pulled the word out of his mouth. Seeing the delighted, yet nervous glint in her eyes framed by subtlety wavy locks of golden hair, with her petite form draped in pale pink, and the small smile that formed on her lip gloss

coated lips when she saw her reflection in the mirror and repeated his words “Pretty....good.’, with a reverence that told him it was the first she felt like she could honestly describe herself with those two words.

He later realised it wasn’t the wig or dress that made her pretty, it was the shy tenderness in her nature, the wonder in her eyes, the kindness and fierce loyalty in her heart, along with the strength of someone put through years of cruelty who chooses to fight for others rather than only save herself.

And now here she was, curly hair grown to gentle chestnut waves that barely grazed her shoulders, golden amber highlights brought out by beams of sunlight breaking through the foliage. Thousands of beads of water sparkling against faintly tan skin. The dirty yellow shirt exchanged for a white long sleeved shirt turned grey by the water with colorful little flowers printed on, and a pair of old denim shorts handed down from Nancy.

For a rare moment, she was carefree with joy radiating from her tiny smile, a far cry from the frail and petrified girl drenched in chill rain hiding in the woods. Mike couldn’t help but soak up the sight, wanting to remember this moment forever.

Before he knew it, Mike was grimacing at his watch like it just insulted his mother and announcing they didn’t have long before Hopper was supposed to be arriving and they better be there or he would skin them alive for ignoring his warnings about El being outside.

Will carefully gathered the empty jars in his arms— empty because Dustin earlier spoke of his plans to take the tadpoles home and possibly record their growth for an upcoming science fair project, but El pestered him with questions on why.

It wasn’t until her eyes retreated to the ground, shoulders shrugging, and she whispered “But....it’s scary....” that he understood and released them all back into the water while everyone bounced back and forth different ideas with goals aimed more so to lessen El’s guilt ridden apologies when she sensed the heaviness in the air.



The walk back through the trees and brush was long, everyone carried on tired legs and drained, but content spirits. Lucas and Dustin were busy having what sounded like an insult match with Max towards the front of the lot of teens, with Will listened with occasional chuckles behind them, mostly trying to focus on balancing the stacked jars in his arms, refusing any offers from others to help.

El was walking besides Mike, white sneakers with splotches of drying mud maneuvering through and over patches of thorns and logs with a practiced soundness in her step the others didn't have. Her hand was a small spark of warmth everytime it absentmindedly grazed his. She always habitually gravitated towards him, almost subconsciously seeking out the security in his presence, but he didn't mind.

Upon seeing the familiar silhouette of the cabin interrupted by towering trees, Mike started noting the way his jeans, striped t-shirt, and hoodie was still clinging loosely to his skin and how his hair was just now falling out of clumps and he wondered how well he could explain it away to the chief as a water fight in the kitchen when he felt El's hand grab his arm.

When he turned to look at her, her eyes were alert and glued to something above them.

"What?"

She responded by gesturing to the trees towards their left where Mike made out some light rustling in the branches

A jolt of panic lurched inside him. He hurriedly searched for the source of the noise, preparing himself to yell for the others to run when he discovers a demogorgon perched over their heads, claw tipped hands waiting to tear through their flesh. Swift movements caught his eyes, too small and fast to be a full grown demogorgon. One of them paused and the the blur turned to a bird eying the other bird darting after it in a flurry of cherry red and black feathers before narrowly escaping.

The tension melted when he saw a glimmer of delight on El's face when her eyes followed them. Calming himself with a shaky laugh, he remarked, "I don't think they like each other too much" as the pair made their way to the cabin, catching no sight of their friends, so he assumed they had already stepped inside, too wrapped up in

their conversations to notice their group was two people too small.

An idea rushed its way to his head, Mike straightened up and pointed to an invisible bird with a mock scowl and shouted as dramatically as he could muster like he did during DnD campaigns, "Give me back my worms you bird-brained slimy dirt caked excise for a thief!!" The way El's eyes lit up with her chuckles encouraged him to continue.

Mike shifted his stance and brought his hands to his chest with eyes cartoonishly wide and answered in a nasally voice "It wasn't me! I'm innocent, I swear!"

"Oh, so it was your evil twin from Russia, huh?"

Mike hunched his shoulders and said quietly, "...yes?" Earning a laugh from El. She nodded her head and said "It was him, I saw him!" Before pretending to pull a worm out of her pocket and popping it into her mouth.

They laughed and when their feet finally landed on the porch steps, El lifted a hand to open the door knob, but paused, lips drawn in a tight line like she was contemplating something. She swiveled on her heel and sat down on one of the rickety steps and looked up at Mike, asking the question with her eyes.

He gave her a smile that was trying hard to be a smirk and joined her. They sat in silence for a few moments, listening to the chatter of birds and occasionally snap of a twig and rustle from the breeze. El lifted up her legs to her chest to loosely hug whilst nudging her cheek atop her knees, looking down at the few inches of flooring between them with droopy eyes and Mike snuck an adoring smile at her.

This was a sort of serenity he only seldom got from the playful banter and roughhousing between him and his other friends and an even farther cry from the thoughts screaming he was going to die and tightening a coil around his lungs, reverberating through every throbbing heartbeat, taking over his senses and every fiber of his body.

"Mike?" He didn't quite get why it had this effect on him, but it always made his heart flutter a little whenever she would softly speak

his name. That someone as sweet and gentle as her with the hidden bravery, loyalty, and impossible strength of the heroes he read about in comics would utter his name with reverence attached rather than exaggerated annoyance from his friends or disgust from the bullies at school.

Her big doe eyes lifted up to meet his, eyebrows upturned slightly in way that painted her with the innocence of someone who has no idea how to fight for survival.

“Yeah, El?” His voice was softer than he intended, he hunched over so he was closer, giving himself the flimsy excuse that he needed to hear her better.

“Am I your girlfriend?”  
Shit, she hasn’t forgotten.

He leaned back, suddenly wanting to be a thousand miles away. He took a deep breathe and prepared an answer. There was no use dodging the topic as if El would laugh in his face and never speak to him again if he didn’t mask his true thoughts with something smooth.

“Well, you... can be if you want to, I just never really asked ‘cause—um....” He brought hand to rub the back of his neck, avoiding El’s gaze, already filling with regret and deciding with even more determination that his reasoning was stupid.

He heard El move and saw out of the corner of his eye she had lifted her head up and turned her body to face him more, interest peaked. “Because what?”

He stared down at his feet and took another, deeper breather to prepare for what’s about to come.

“It’s kinda stupid, but—I dunno, I guess I was just afraid you’d say yes just because you’d think you have to.” He ran his hand through his hair, wishing he could just end the conversation, hating the feelings of vulnerability and nervousness. It wasn’t something he thought about when it first became routine to see her, too wrapped up in recovering while being too much in a daze to want to bring himself to the possible reality. But it slowly started to creep up on

him in bed when he had nothing to distract himself with.

El's eyebrows drew together in the beginnings of a frown and she asked "Why would I think that?"

He could no longer avoid saying it out loud. "Because I know that when we found you, you didn't have people who—" he paused to find the right words. "—treated you like a person." He eyed the part of her arm where he knew the numbers "011" were imbedded into her skin. Something that was at first a source of curiosity that had quickly grew to sizzling anger that boiled into pure hatred for the man with white hair who had held her like she was a possession and tried to drag her back to the lab upon realizing it's what the faded blotches of ink meant.

Once he started the words came tumbling out without any barriers caused by anxiety and insecurities. "So I know that you weren't really used to people being nice to you, so I guess—uh, I really don't want you to think you have to be my girlfriend because you owe me, because you don't. Not after everything you've done for all of us.

He looked back at her, trying to convey his sincerity with his eyes. She was quietly listening with a unnervingly blank expression.

"Being someone's girlfriend or boyfriend, it's supposed to be something special. For people who are more than friends. Y'know, kiss 'n hold hands and all that cheesy stuff you wouldn't do with other people." He added the last sentence with a quiet, funny voice, trying to lighten his feelings with humor, but managed to make his face red.

"More than friends". She echoed.

"Yeah, so it's really not a big deal if you don't actually like me that much....you don't have to be my girlfriend because you think you owe me or won't find anyone better....."

Her frown deepened and she cocked her head to the side and stayed silent. Mike feared she was mulling over if it was worth saying yes, but reasoning told him she was just in disbelief.

Then her face softened with a hint of a smile and inched closer to his until he could feel her warmth breathe tickle his skin and could count the specks of gold underneath fluttering lashes lining eyes that were firmly fixated on his.

He grew stiff with surprise at first, but let himself melt when her mouth gently touched his, basking in the softness of her lips and the buzz that fluttered throughout his body accompanied by both relief and a surge of joy.

It was over quicker than it should have. When El pulled back and opened her eyes she beamed at him.

“Yes”.

“Really?” He asked with the beginnings of a grin, still not quite believing it. She nodded, mirroring his grin.

“More than friends.” She said happily, saying all she needed to say with those three words. He threw an arm around her and pulled her against him, not really sure how else to handle the happiness bursting through him. El responded by giggling and nuzzling her head into his shoulder when they heard the dried leaves crunching beneath Hopper’s heavy feet along with a muffled “Oh snap!” coming from the windows behind them.

### **Author's Note:**

Du, du DUh!! Let's be honest, Hop secretly loves Mike and wouldn't murder him for kissing El, but we know he's going to pretend! I can imagine the other kids watching through the window and the boys going "Ewwww!!!!" when El kisses Mike while Max tells them to grow the hell up.